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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN - ROUND TABLE ON POLITICAL PARTY LEGISLATION

¶1. Summary: On July 1, the NDI and IRI organized a round-table on Kazakhstan's political party law which also included broader discussion of Kazakhstan's Madrid commitments. All the major parties were represented, including the ruling Nur Otan party. Several participants presented concrete proposals on how to amend the current legislation to allow for easier party registration and greater political participation for opposition parties. Many expressed skepticism regarding the government's willingness to fulfill the Madrid commitments. Nur Otan's representative claimed that draft amendments to the political party law were already in the works. End Summary.

¶2. On July 1, the DCM attended an NDI/IRI-organized roundtable on Kazakhstan's political party law. The event brought together high-level representatives from major opposition parties, including Azat's Peter Svoik and Bulat Abishev, the un-registered Alga party's Vladimir Kozlov, OSDP's Serikbai Alibaev, Az Zhол's Burikhan Nurmukhamedov, the Communist Party's Serikbolsyn Abdildin, and Adilet's Tulegen Sadykov. Nur Otan was represented by a mid-level legal advisor, Yuri Subchenkov. The roundtable included NGOs, OSCE representatives, and members of several diplomatic missions. British Ambassador to Kazakhstan Paul Brummell and a British MP in Astana for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session were both in attendance at the event.

¶3. The majority of the participants agreed that Kazakhstan's political party legislation needs to be reformed. Azat, OSDP, and Adilet suggested several concrete legislative amendments, including requiring only 5,000 signatures to set up a party, as opposed to the current 50,000. They also suggested lowering the threshold for getting into the Mazhilis from 7 percent to 5 percent. (Note: The threshold is set by the election law, not by the political party law. End Note.) Alga's Kozlov added that the current rules make it easy for the government to suspend or refuse a party's registration.

(Note: Alga's registration has been pending for almost two years. End Note.) Several speakers criticized the lack of transparency and objectivity in the Central Election Commission and called for reform of the local election commissions. Not surprisingly, the discussion was laden with criticism of the ruling Nur Otan party, specifically for allegedly being too heavily involved in government policies, meddling with the opposition media, and interfering with freedom of assembly.

¶4. Speaking more broadly, Azat's Svoik expressed skepticism that Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE chairmanship will bring significant changes in terms of democratic reform. He characterized Foreign Minister Tazhin's speech at Madrid as "mere words" meant to placate the international community and predicted that the government will not go further than making "cosmetic changes" to the legislation it committed to amend. The Communist Party's Abdildin said the parties must demand that the government fulfill its Madrid commitments, and Alga's Kozlov added that the government must issue a schedule of implementation. Several participants said that concrete legislative improvements to the political party law will only be made if the opposition parties are included in the working group tasked to work on it. (Note: The round-table's final resolution, released on July 3, included these demands, as well as a call on the OSCE to require

fulfillment of the Madrid obligations. End Note.)

¶15. As the sole representative of the ruling Nur Otan party in attendance, Sabchenkov sounded a different note from the rest of the participants. Referring to Nazarbayev's June 29 speech to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session in Astana (in which for the first time, Nazarbayev publicly discussed the Madrid commitments), Sabchenkov said that Nazarbayev has already tasked the government with amending the party legislation. A new draft law was in the works, he claimed. (Note: In a separate conversation, Deputy Minister of Justice Dulat Kustavletov informed us that while a working group on the political party law has not yet been convened, new draft legislation will be ready before the end of the year. End Note.) Sabchenkov also contended that registration issues faced by some parties were the result of incompetence and corruption among low-level government workers, and not a concerted campaign on the part of Nur Otan to block unwanted competition. His statements were met by open skepticism from the opposition.

¶16. Comment: Many of the proposals on amending the political party law that were put forward at the roundtable are well-known to the government. Several had previously been made by NGOs and opposition parties, including the idea of requiring fewer signatures for registration. End Comment.

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